



# How to Build Trust on Your Team

## IT STARTS WITH YOU

Organizations are increasingly appreciating and realizing the value of teams. Those that create and effectively deploy high-performing cross-functional teams tend to have higher levels of employee engagement, **and engagement drives improved results.**

As evidence, a recent study by Aon Hewitt found that companies that score in the top quartile for engagement scores **delivered 50% higher shareholder returns** than the average company.

Further, Insync Surveys found that engaged employees deliver **18% higher productivity and 60% higher quality** than under-engaged employees.

Your ultimate success as a teammate and/or leader will hinge heavily on your ability to engage others, force-multiply your influence, and bring out the best in others. As you take on increasing levels of responsibility, your success and the success of your organization will likely depend on how well you serve on, build, and lead teams. As the Navy Seals say, “Individuals play the game, but teams beat the odds.”

**The highest performing teams exhibit a high degree of trust among teammates and the leader.** Building trust is easier said than done. In a recent broadscale survey of thousands of companies by The Trust Edge Leadership Institute, they found that trust is indeed very important, but not as prevalent as one might think.



Your ultimate success as a teammate and/or leader will hinge heavily on your ability to engage others, force-multiply your influence, and bring out the best in others.

As support, below are the results when people were asked:

What most makes you want to work for an organization?	
Trusted Leadership	31%
Fun Environment	29%
Compensation Package	28%
Training Opportunities	12%

I feel most comfortable providing input to my leader when:	
I trust my leader	32%
My leader trusts me	28%
The situation is urgent	20%
I'm asked	16%
Never	5%

How much do you trust your current employer?	
Somewhat	37%
Very Much	35%
Completely	12%
Very Little	11%
Not at All	5%

Please rate the current level of trust on your team	
Very Much	42%
Somewhat	34%
Completely	14%
Very Little	14%
Not at All	2%

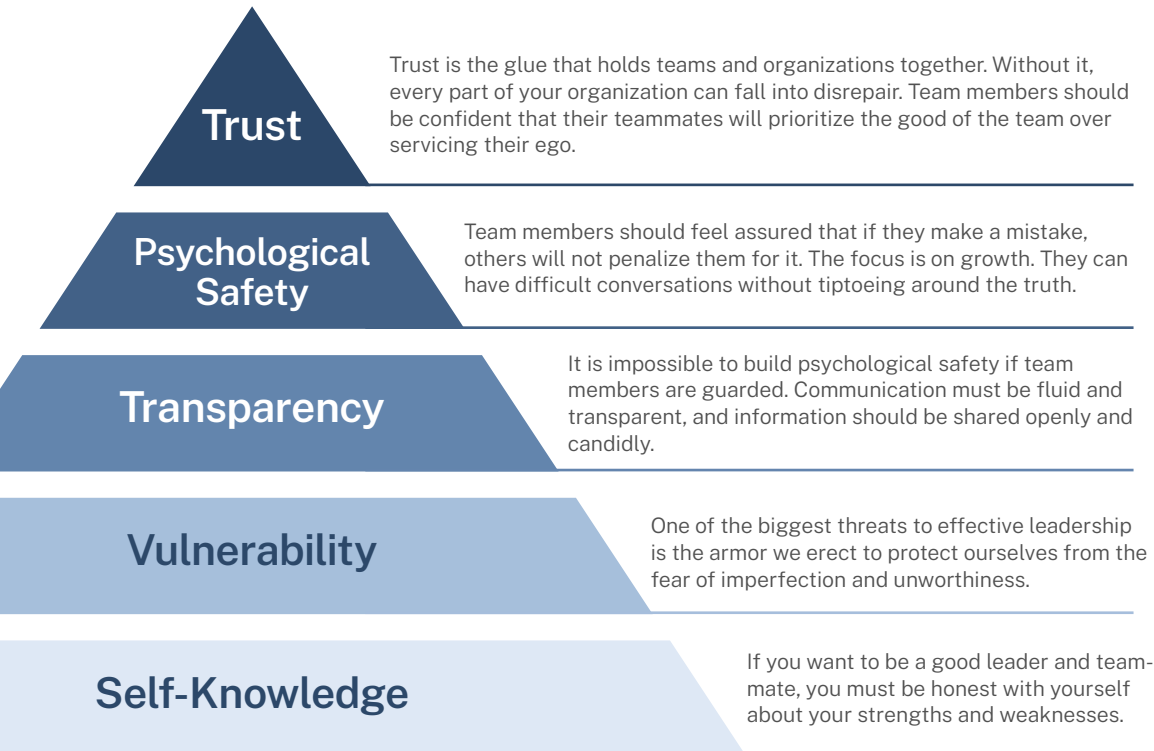
Clearly there's room for improvement. To make it happen, **the best teams cultivate self-knowledge, vulnerability, transparency, and psychological safety as building blocks to achieve the team trust needed to achieve peak performance.** Obviously, the leader can't simply bestow or instill trust into a team. It takes some heavy lifting.



The leader can't simply bestow or instill trust into a team. It takes some heavy lifting.

# 4 Steps to Team Trust

Over the last four decades, I've contributed to, led, studied, and advised many high-performing teams and a few low-performing teams as well. Based on learnings from successes (and even more lessons from mistakes) I've created the following blueprint for building the trust needed for a team to exceed expectations:



The best teams cultivate self-knowledge, vulnerability, transparency, and psychological safety as building blocks to achieve the team trust needed to achieve peak performance.

## Step 1: Self-knowledge

If you want to be a good leader and teammate, you must first be honest with yourself about your strengths and weaknesses. The breadth of your knowledge isn't nearly as important as understanding your knowledge's boundaries.

Self-knowledge isn't limited just to hard skills. It's also about **knowing when you're vulnerable to your defaults**—the kinds of situations where circumstances do the thinking for you because you've been triggered.

In his book, *Clear Thinking*, Sean Parrish reveals that **people are often unaware that circumstances are thinking for them**. And because we don't know we should be thinking, we cede control to our impulses and execute what is called a default behavior. A default behavior is similar to muscle memory for our brains and emotions.

Unfortunately, **our default behavior can make things worse**. For example, when someone slights us, we sometimes lash out with angry words. When someone cuts us off, we might assume malice on their part. When things go slower than we want, we can become frustrated and impatient. When someone is passive-aggressive, we might take the bait and escalate. We've been triggered.

In these moments of reaction, we don't realize that our brains have been hijacked, and that the outcome might go against what we seek. We don't realize that our emotions are making us react in ways that create problems downstream.

**If you don't know your vulnerabilities, your defaults will exploit them to gain control of your circumstances.**



Most of us think we are very self-aware. We think we know what we are good at, what we're not good at, and why. The problem is that we are too often wrong.

---

## The Problem

Most of us think we are very self-aware. We think we know what we are good at, what we're not good at, and why. **The problem is that we are too often wrong**, especially if you are a man (for further perspective, [see this TED Talk delivered by Tomas Chamorro Premuzic](#)).

This lack of self-awareness is exacerbated by the fact that **we don't know what we don't know, and it can severely hamstring our performance as a leader and/or teammate**.

You see, most of the time we operate in an unconscious state. Current scientific estimates are that some 90%-95% of brain activity is unconscious, says Emma Young in *New Scientist* magazine. These include habits and patterns, automatic body function, creativity, emotions, personality, beliefs and values, cognitive biases, and long-term memory. Moreover, up to 40% of behavior is habitual, taking anywhere from 15 to over 250 days to form a new habit.



Unfortunately, in our **unconscious mind** are many of the negative or unpleasant things that occurred earlier in our formative experiences that we learned to bury, compartmentalize, or deny to help us navigate them and survive. A necessary life skill, not a flaw. We built a coat of armor to help us survive.

While that might have worked in the short term, it created gremlins that are just waiting to jump out and impede our performance when we are emotionally triggered. And we get triggered a lot more than most of us think.

---

**“Never forget that your unconscious is smarter than you, faster than you, and more powerful than you. It may even control you. You will never know all of its secrets.” — Cordelia Fine**

---

In their book, *The 15 Commitments of Conscious Leadership*, Jim Dethmer, Diana Chapman, and Kaley Warner Kemp reveal that we often live life unconsciously in the habitual trance of our personality, our regret and anger about the past, and our hope, fear, and greed about the future. All of us bounce back and forth between the conscious and unconscious. When operating unconsciously in cruise control without really thinking, we can be masters of denial and distortion to fit our narrative.

When operating in the unconscious state, here are the tell-tale manifestations:

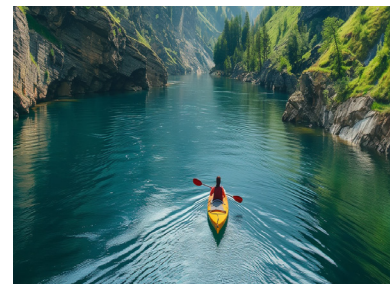
- We can be closed, defensive, and committed to being right.
- Fear is often the root cause, masked by anger, blame, shame, and guilt.
- We repress and deny feelings and emotions.
- We do not fully see what is happening around us.
- We are cut off from an authentic experience of people, ourselves, and our lives.
- We are reactive.



All of us bounce back and forth between the conscious and unconscious.

- We are not free to lead from creative impulse, nor are we tuned in to what the moment is requiring of us.
- We default to complaining, blame and excuses.
- We do not see, hear, or feel authentically and accurately.
- We believe that external realities are responsible for our unhappiness, our failures, and for our insecurities.

In a nutshell, when we are operating unconsciously, we spend too much time trying to be right, defending our egos, reacting to our insecurities, and being defensive. This diminishes our effectiveness as leaders and teammates. And it happens to all of us much more frequently than most of us realize.



People who master their defaults get the best real-world results.

## What You Need to Know

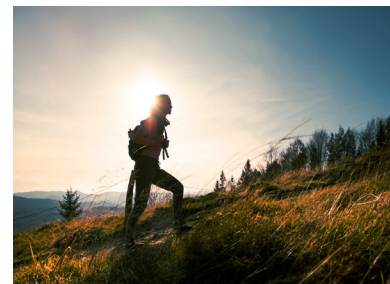
There are many default behaviors that our brains will automatically execute when triggered unless we stop and take the time to think. **You have little hope of thinking clearly if you can't manage your defaults.**

Let's focus on the four most prevalent defaults according to Sean Parrish:

- 1 **The emotion default:** We tend to respond to feelings rather than reasons and facts. When we respond emotionally, we often don't even realize that we're in a position that calls for logical thinking. Emotions can overtake the best of us, driving us away from thinking clearly.
- 2 **The ego default:** We tend to react to anything that threatens our sense of self-worth or our position in a group hierarchy. When this happens, we're more concerned with being right than outcomes, learning, and growth. One reason we find it hard to empower others at work is that having them depend on us for every decision makes us feel important and indispensable – the opposite of force-multiplying our leadership influence, which is what we should be doing! Our ego hijacks our effectiveness and undermines outcomes.

- 3 **The social default:** We tend to conform to the norms of our larger social group. It's easy to underestimate our biological instinct to fit in as well as the subtle messages we received in our youth about conforming. Fear holds us back from taking risks and achieving our full potential. But remember, growth occurs outside our comfort zone.
- 4 **The inertia default:** We humans are habit-forming and comfort-seeking. This helps explain why we get complacent. It takes a lot of effort to build momentum but far less to maintain it. Unfortunately, inertia discourages experimentation, course correction, and key avenues for growth. Inertia also prevents us from doing hard things. The longer we avoid the hard thing we know we should do, the harder it becomes to do.

**People who master their defaults get the best real-world results.** It's not that they don't have emotions or an ego, they just know how to control both rather than be controlled by them.



Growth occurs outside of our comfort zone.

## What Success Looks Like

Before digging into the steps you can take to achieve the greater self-knowledge needed to achieve your full potential as a leader and a teammate, let's define the end in mind:

**When we are at our best we are functioning with full consciousness and whole hearts.**

- We experience the reality of the here and now and respond in the moment because we are *fully* present.
- We avoid getting trapped in old patterns. We learn to locate, name, and release our feelings and emotions when they are unproductive.
- We have the awareness and determination to turn our beliefs into behaviors.
- We have a growth mindset and are open, curious, and committed to learning. Sure, we get defensive – who doesn't? But we have learned to interrupt this natural reactivity to pause, breathe, accept, and shift our thinking and behavior.

- We become masters at managing energy, and we cultivate cultures that are engaged, passionate, creative, innovative, and intuitive. In this way, we become force-multipliers who bring out the best in others. True servant leaders.

## 10 Steps to Cultivate Self-knowledge

Knowing just what it is that you know is among the most practical skills you can have. The size of what you know isn't nearly as important as having a sense of your knowledge's boundaries. These 10 steps will help you cultivate self-knowledge:

- 1 **Psychological and behavioral preference assessments** can shed significant light onto your strengths and weaknesses, what you prefer, and your impact on others. My favorite is [SDI from Crucial Learning](#) because it reveals not just your default motivations, but also how they change under pressure.
- 2 **Seek ongoing feedback, not episodic.** Most organizations have become much better at evaluating KPIs and other measures to gauge performance. Ironically, soliciting and giving valuable feedback has become rare. But, as Brene Brown explains so well in her book, *Daring Greatly*, without feedback, there can be no transformative change. Unfortunately, we're not comfortable with hard conversations and this can hinder our ability to give and receive feedback in a way that moves people and processes forward.  
  
If leaders expect real learning, critical thinking, and change, then discomfort should be normalized. The big challenge for leaders is getting our heads and hearts around the fact that we need to cultivate the courage to be uncomfortable and to teach the people around us how to accept discomfort as a part of growth. If we are not courageous enough to ask for feedback and receive it, we'll never be good at giving it.
- 3 **Take responsibility** for whatever is occurring in your life and let go of blaming anyone else. It's a complete waste of time and energy. And in the end, most people really don't care about your excuses.
- 4 **Align on a clear vision and purpose** for yourself and your organization. Draw four overlapping circles on a paper and answer; 1) what are you



The size of what you know isn't nearly as important as having a sense of your knowledge's boundaries.



uniquely good at, 2) what do you enjoy doing, 3) what does society need, and 4) can you make money doing it? The intersection of those four questions is a good starting point for a meaningful purpose.

- 5 **Let go of control of people**, things, and circumstances you were never meant to be in control of and have never been in control of.
- 6 The first step Sean Parrish recommends to improve your outcomes, based on many years of research, is to **train yourself to identify the moments when judgment is called for in the first place, and pause to create space to think clearly**. This requires managing your defaults. When triggered, get in touch with why you feel the way you feel before reacting.

Practice becoming more aware of when you might be triggered. Shift and maximize your presence. Take a moment to pause and check in with yourself. Consciously breathe to settle your nervous system and be fully present in the moment. Check your posture, and then clarify what you've heard.

- 7 **Choose curiosity over defensiveness and being right**. Listen to understand rather than respond. Ask clarifying questions with an orientation toward learning rather than reaction. We are conditioned to solve and act. Opt for learning and growth first to achieve better solutions.

View life as one big learning university because what we don't know we don't know is a much larger body of work than what we do know. When Einstein was asked what made him so brilliant, he responded that he spent 90% of his time on the problem and 10% on the solution whereas the average human being does the opposite.

- 8 While it is beyond the scope of this paper, **a psychotherapist can be incredibly helpful** if you want to fully explore and better understand why you do what you do. The psychological and behavioral assessments mentioned above can be a valuable tool to better understand your motivations and behavior, but they are limited in their ability to help you dig deeper to fully understand why. Without fully understanding the root causes of what you prefer and why you do what you do, any attempt to know yourself more fully, understand others more accurately, manage yourself more effectively, and achieve better results by building healthier relationships will be limited.



We are conditioned to solve and act. Opt for learning and growth first to achieve better solutions.

**9 Harness the positive aspects of ego while mitigating its negative impacts.**

A healthy ego can contribute positively to team performance by fueling confidence, risk-taking, innovation and resilience. However, when the ego is inflated, it can undermine decision making, team dynamics, collaboration and growth. Practice humility by acknowledging your limitations and valuing the contributions of others to create a team culture of mutual respect and collaboration that values team success over individual glory.

**10 Consider exploring the following resources to deepen your understanding of effective leadership and team dynamics:**

- [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey](#)
- [Clear Thinking by Shane Parish](#)
- [The Conscious Parent by Dr. Shefali Tsabary](#)
- [Atomic Habits by James Clear](#)
- [Daring Greatly by Brene Brown](#)
- [Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman](#)
- [Mindsight by Daniel J. Siegel](#)
- [The 15 Commitments of Conscious Leadership by Jim Dethmer, Diana Chapman and Kaley Warner Klemp](#)
- [The 5 Dysfunctions of a Team by Patrick Lencioni](#)
- [Margaret Heffernan Ted Talk regarding daring to disagree and complementariness](#)

None of us is perfect. We all have opportunities for improvement and growth. If you want to maximize your positive influence in just about any role, it's imperative you learn to serve on and lead teams effectively.

**Team performance hinges on trust, and the most fundamental building block for building trust is self-knowledge** because it is foundational to the next three steps to building full team trust.

In my next paper I'll share step two: why it is so important to be vulnerable with your teammates, and how to do it genuinely, productively, and comfortably.



If you want to maximize your positive influence in just about any role, it's imperative you learn to serve on and lead teams effectively.



## About the Author

Jude Rake is the founding principal of JDR Growth Partners, a consulting firm that helps family-owned businesses, boards, chief executives, and their leadership teams achieve improved results and sustainable growth. Before founding JDR, Jude served in multiple C-level roles including CEO for fifteen years. Jude is also the author of *The Bridge to Growth: How Servant Leaders Achieve Better Results and Why It Matters Now More Than Ever*. Find out more at [jdrgrowthpartners.com](http://jdrgrowthpartners.com) and [The Bridge to Growth](#).



Team performance hinges on trust, and the most fundamental building block for building trust is self-knowledge.